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TAGS: PHUM PGOV SI

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT PLAN FOR DISPLACED ROMA MET WITH FIERCE RESISTANCE

REF: LJUBLJANA 719

Classified By: COM for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. Tensions continue to rise in Slovenia as the GoS's proposal to relocate the displaced Roma family of Ambrus (reftel) was met with immediate opposition from the local community. Residents frame the dispute as a problem with law and order, not discrimination. But images of angry local protesters are being interpreted as manifestations against Roma, proving difficult for the leadership in Ljubljana to explain to the rest of Slovenia and the rest of Europe. As media, civil rights groups, and opposition leaders blasted the government for its handling of the family's relocation, the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner arrived to investigate, and government leaders backpedaled in hopes of finding a solution that is amenable to all parties. Brokering an agreement will be extraordinarily difficult, but the more significant issue is whether the government will push forward with legislation and programs to address the long-term challenge of Roma integration in Slovenia. END SUMMARY.

- - - - - GOVERNMENT PROPOSES NEW HOMESITE FOR DISPLACED ROMA - - - - -

¶2. (U) On Monday, November 13, the Government of Slovenia announced a proposal, a week before its self-imposed deadline of November 19th, to relocate the displaced Roma family to a small village located nearby their former home of Ambrus. The proposal calls for the 30 members of the Strojan family to move to a settlement near the village of Malo Hudo, just two kilometers from their original home in Ambrus, both of which are within the municipality of Ivancna Gorica.

¶3. (U) The site is owned by the government and would be transferred to the family in exchange for their current land in Ambrus. The government also promised to bring in temporary, prefabricated "trailer" housing, to expedite the process for obtaining building permits, and to erect three permanent homes on the site. According to media and government reports, representatives of the Roma from Ambrus chose the site on Monday after viewing several different options. GoS officials stated that the temporary housing and a formal written agreement with the family could be completed as early as the end of this week, allowing the family to move in almost immediately.

¶4. (U) On Monday a local attorney for the Roma family, Tatjana Markelj, announced that the Strojans would be filing a lawsuit against the community of Ambrus for the forced relocation.

- - - - - PROPOSAL MET WITH FIERCE LOCAL OPPOSITION

¶ 15. (C) The relocation plan was met with immediate, fierce opposition from the local community. Approximately 300 residents from the village of Malo Hudo gathered on the evening of November 13th for a protest meeting to discuss the government's announcement. Mayor of Ivancna Gorica, Jernej Lampret, and other local officials attended the meeting. Residents expressed serious frustration with the local and national government for failing to consult them on the decision. They began collecting signatures of those who were against the relocation of the Strojan family to Malo Hudo and demanded that the proposal for the relocation be changed. According to an Embassy local staff member (PROTECT) who was on hand for the meeting, the residents were furious with the Mayor and other local officials, who contradicted statements made by Director of the Government Office for National Minorities Stanko Baluh that a "local official was on hand" when representatives from the national government and the Roma family looked at potential sites Monday morning. Attendees also spoke at length about their previous difficulties with members of the Strojan family.

¶ 16. (U) On Tuesday, November 14, the city council of Ivancna Gorica voted unanimously against allowing the Roma family to return to their municipality. Mayor Lampret said that the possibility of finding an acceptable location for this Roma family in the municipality was "no longer possible" and any attempt to find a new location there would only create new conflicts. According to media reports, several hundred local residents who were gathered to demonstrate against the return of the Strojans cheered on the decision, while other Malo Hudo residents prepared to block the route to the proposed site with trucks, tractors and fallen trees.

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¶ 17. (C) COMMENT. A well-liked and trusted locally employed staff member of the U.S. Embassy (STRICTLY PROTECT) is a resident of Malo Hudo and lives nearby the proposed location for the resettlement of the Strojan family. He attended the town meeting on November 13 and is closely following the issue. He maintains, and other sources have commented, that the primary problem for local residents is not the presence of a Roma family, but specifically the Strojan family, who have a reputation for harboring non-Roma criminals, blatantly ignoring local law, and terrorizing the local population. The local staffer admits that some protesters may be motivated by a dislike of Roma in general, but that the vast majority of the local residents are simply fed up with the escalation of problems and crimes committed by the Strojans and their friends and by the complete inability of local police or authorities to handle the problem. He says that the years of problems with this family were topped off by the violent incident in Ambrus that left a local citizen in a coma. The staffer reports that this incident, in combination with a lack of trust in local authorities to enforce the law, is what motivated local residents to take action. END COMMENT.

ROMA COMMUNITY WEIGHS IN ON THE SITUATION

¶ 18. (U) The Forum of Roma Councilors, a group made up of approximately twenty Roma elected to local municipal councils throughout Slovenia, visited Ambrus Friday, November 10 to talk with local authorities and work to resolve the problem. Their visit did not bring about any workable solutions.

¶ 19. (U) The President of the Slovenian Roma Association, Jozek Horvat, who is in the U.S. with the Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program, spoke to reporters in New York regarding the latest incident. He said that the action against the Roma family in Ambrus constituted discrimination, but he welcomed the government's assistance

in moving the family to Postojna because he believed the family would have been harmed if not for their relocation. Horvat, who has been working with the government on Roma legislation, urged the government to move forward quickly in addressing Roma issues, saying, "there is no more time for thinking...the time has come to act." After meeting with Human Rights Commissioner Thomas Hammarberg, Slovenian Roma Association Secretary General Janja Roser expressed concern that without government action, "relocations of the Roma will become commonplace" and that the gatherings of local residents in Ambrus and Malo Hudo were illegal because they promote violence.

¶10. (U) Family representative Mirko Strojan has fanned the fires of the problem over the course of the week, with numerous comments to the press (some calling for violent actions) and calling on Thursday, November 16 for a march of 600 Roma (from Slovenia and Croatia) from the Slovenian town of Grosuplje to the village of Ambrus. However, shortly after announcing it, Strojan said the march would be postponed.

¶11. (U) BACKGROUND NOTE. Horvat, and many of the members of the Forum of Roma Councilors, are part of the well organized Roma community in the northeastern Slovenian region of Prekmurje that has long had positive relations with the local community. These communities have a delicate relationship with the Roma groups in Dolenjska, which have been more transient, had more difficulty integrating into their respective communities, and been the focus of many of the most difficult Roma problems over the past few years. END BACKGROUND NOTE.

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CRITICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT CONTINUES
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¶12. (U) On the evening of Tuesday, November 14, people from Slovenian civil rights groups assembled in Ljubljana and marched to the Parliament Building to call for the integration of Slovenia's Roma, highlight the problem of discrimination in Slovenia, criticize the government's handling of the Ambrus situation, and call for the dismissal of Minister of Interior Dragutin Mate. Comments were highlighted by extreme criticism of the government, including signs that read "We Are All Gypsies Under (Prime Minister Janez) Jansa" and referenced the Ku Klux Klan. While media reports estimated the crowd at approximately 500, PolOff observed a smaller crowd of approximately 250. The protest, which was not legally registered, attracted roughly 75

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onlookers and a significant presence of riot police and media.

¶13. (U) Government opposition leaders also continued their criticism of the government's handling of Roma issues, with Liberal Democracy (LDS) leader Jelko Kacin saying on Wednesday, November 15, that the government's actions were "encouraging intolerance towards those who are different and minorities." He also criticized Jansa for visiting Iraq on Wednesday instead of receiving visiting Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe Thomas Hammarberg.

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GOVERNMENT BACKPEDALS ON PLAN & WORKS TO COUNTER CRITICISM
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¶14. (C) Government officials responded to the escalating local and national criticism on Tuesday afternoon, appearing to backpedal in regards to the proposed new settlement in Malo Hudo by saying that a "final decision had not yet been made" and that they would seek a "new approach...(with) consensus from the local population." Minister of Education and Chair of the Slovenian Government Commission for the Protection of the Roma Ethnic Community, Milan Zver, has been a lead spokesman on the issue, pushing moderation and

dialogue. He has called for the Strojan family to return to Ivancna Gorica saying that it would not be fair to "export" the problem to another community. Zver highlighted the difficulty of finding a solution for the Strojans saying that the family does not want to join other Roma and that "nobody wants them, neither the Roma nor others." Zver said that the situation of Roma in Slovenia is "not ideal, but much better than in many parts of Europe." His colleague, Interior Minister Dragutin Mate, has taken the majority of the heat from civil rights groups and the Ombudsman for the situation surrounding the Strojan family's move to Postojna. Mate responded to criticism by denying that the state forced the Strojans to move and saying that they willingly chose to move themselves.

¶15. (U) Prime Minister Janez Jansa, returning from a week-long trip to the Middle East, spoke out on the topic on Thursday, calling for calm in order to give the government time to find a location that will be suitable for all parties. He added that the intense media coverage has pushed resolution farther away. Jansa mentioned that the government might consider several locations near Ljubljana including the area of Trzin. Jansa also said that what was certain was that the family could not return to Ambrus given that it is not a legal settlement and could not be found to be a legal settlement in the future. In response to opposition attacks, Jansa pointed out that these problems were not new and that his government "inherited" many of them from the previous government, which did not manage to pass Roma legislation during its twelve years in power.

- - - - - WHILE THE EU COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS INVESTIGATES - - - - -

¶16. (U) On Tuesday and Wednesday, November 14 and 15, Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe Thomas Hammarberg visited Slovenia to discuss the Roma issue with GoS officials, civil rights organization leaders, the Slovenian Roma Association, and the Roma family in question. Hammarberg met with GoS Ombudsman Matjaz Hanzek, Minister of Interior Dragutin Mate, Minister of Environment Janez Podobnik, and Minister of Education and Chair of the Slovenian Government Commission for the Protection of the Roma Ethnic Community Milan Zver and visited with the Roma family in their temporary residence in Postojna. On Thursday, November 16, Hammarberg held a press conference calling the relocation of the family "unacceptable" but saying that the government was handling the issue with "serious and sincere efforts." He lauded efforts to bring the family and local citizens together to find a compromise solution but said that ultimately the family should have a right to move back to their home in Ambrus. Hammarberg was hopeful regarding overall Roma issues in Slovenia, pointing to inclusion of Roma on local city councils and efforts to finally move forward formal legislation outlining protection for the Roma community.

- - - - - WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE STROJAN FAMILY - - - - -

¶17. (U) With the government's original deadline of November 19th looming there will be significant pressure to move the Strojan family out of their temporary housing and into a permanent settlement. Family representative Mirko Strojan

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has told the media that they will stay in Postojna at least until the 19th and perhaps a day or two longer, but not beyond that. All signs point to the government, through Minister Mate, Minister Zver, and the Office for National Minorities Director Baluh, working with local authorities and community members to find a more feasible permanent solution than what was presented on November 13th. In the meantime, national and local authorities will have to overcome extreme

frustration and distrust from both the local citizens of Ivancna Gorica and the Roma family Strojan, while being subject to vigilant scrutiny from the media, civil rights groups, opposition politicians, and the European authorities.

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ROMA PROTECTION LEGISLATION JUMPSTARTED
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¶18. (U) After languishing for years, the government has announced that legislation to protect the rights of Roma is currently going through administrative corrections, with the intent that it will be ready for government adoption by the end of November. While the legislation will focus on all Roma in Slovenia, it is likely that it will bolster the generally positive relations between Roma and local communities in Prekmurje. The hope is that it will also help improve the tenuous situation of Roma groups in Dolenjska.

¶19. (C) COMMENT. In a matter of weeks the case of the Strojan family has ballooned from a small town issue to one of national and even international significance. While local residents of Ivancna Gorica decry media coverage as uninformed and unbalanced, repeated images of angry local protesters are being interpreted as manifestations against Roma, proving difficult for the leadership in Ljubljana to explain otherwise to the rest of Slovenia and the rest of Europe. Brokering an agreement that is acceptable to all parties will be extraordinarily difficult for the Jansa government, and post believes it will continue to take serious hits (some more justified than others) for its handling of the Roma in Dolenjska. Heated, highly publicized criticism from opposition leaders comes across as a political pot shot given the current opposition's lack of progress on the Roma issue during their hold on power. It is unsurprising that Jansa feels frustrated with their sudden interest in making the integration of Roma a partisan political issue. While past governments were able to push Roma issues off to the side, the silver lining of the incident is that it seems to have convinced the current government and Slovenian Parliament to push forward with legislation protecting the Roma and with workable solutions to integrate all Roma communities into mainstream Slovenian life. Whether progress can be made depends on the efforts and willingness of all sides. END COMMENT.

ROBERTSON